

An indefatigable Ruby Petersen puts the romp in 'Romper Room'

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BILL MANN



Watching "Miss Nancy" crawling around on the floor with all those kids every weekday morning at 8:30 on Channel 2 is exhausting enough, but

watching one of her "Romper Room" tapings is even more so.

That's because Miss Nancy, who's really Miss Ruby (Ruby Visek Petersen) tapes five shows every Sunday — with two different, energetic groups of kindergartners; there's a two-year waiting list to get a youngster on the show. I'm not sure where Miss Nancy gets the energy: I worked in a co-op nursery school, and I was exhausted at the end of one session.

Not only does Petersen keep plenty busy playing balloon volleyball or fire engines with the kids, but when the taping stops for commercial inserts, she becomes the show's sole producer, calling up camera shots, tapes, and slides while conferring rapid-fire with the director, an intern, and the floor crew. It's a bravura one-woman performance.

The rest of the week, Petersen's on the phone, lining up segments and kids, trying to get a typewriter out of KTVU's parent company ("Maybe this year," she sighs), or trying unsuccessfully to line up a wardrobe deal for herself. ("They always want to send me these nice designer outfits, and I keep telling them I need dresses I can crawl around the floor in.")

It's crazy, and it's a lot of work — at 38, I have a hard enough time mustering the energy for my own two kids. But Petersen's 39 and shows no sign of letting up — or desire to quit — after four years of "Romper Room." In fact, Peterson's even planning a gala, 1,000-guest bash for her 40th birthday Nov. 19. She looks considerably younger, but jokes, "I don't want to celebrate my fortieth alone."

Miss Nancy's somewhat of a show-biz dynamo, all right. And even though she's childless herself, it's obvious she loves kids.

"I have women sometimes who come up to me in a store," Petersen says. "And they'll say they love the show. And when I ask how their kids like it, they'll say they don't have any, they just like to watch them play on TV." (The sadness of this is not lost on Petersen).

Petersen came to the job with the right child care credentials — she taught public schools for years, most recently as a substitute in Santa Rosa elementary schools about four years ago.

But a show-business background was also present — she once got on, then won \$18,000 on "Name That Tune," as well as some lesser money on "The \$20,000 Pyramid." ("I played 'Pyramid' with David Letterman. He asked me out.") A woman can obviously go a long way when she's as attractive, personable, bright, and, yes, as ambitious as Ruby Petersen.

It's hard to believe that the wholesome Miss Nancy once worked as a stand-up comic on Broadway in San Francisco — that's a long way from Do-Bee country. Petersen says of this variegated professional life, "There is a connecting thread in all this — I won't do things that aren't fun."

Petersen, who's been the steady companion of Channel 7 reporter/essayist Bob MacKenzie the past couple of years and now lives in San Francisco, is proudest, however, of the numerous awards her public-service announcements on child abuse have won the past couple of years. "They've aired in about 50 markets around the country, and an unbelievable amount of research had to go into those," she says.

And, in the little spare time she manages to find, Petersen also serves as the local chapter president of the American Women in Radio and TV.

"Romper Room," which started in 1954, is

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the longest-running TV show in the country, and Petersen got the inspiration for her "Miss Nancy" name from the original "Romper Room" hostess in New York, Nancy Claster.

When Petersen auditioned along with 13 other finalists for the job in 1981, "there were no kids there, so I had to fake it. You know how ridiculous you feel by saying to an empty room, 'No, Roger, I don't feel like being a snake today'? But I had a great time." That TV break ended the schoolteaching for awhile.

But the professionally versatile Petersen is careful not to restrict herself to kidvid. She's been doing fill-in work on KLOK Radio recently as "Ruby on the Radio," and also filled in for six months in 1983 as Channel 2's weathercaster.

Has she ever had balky kids on the show, I wondered, since the ones I've always seen with her seem so cheerful?

"Only one that I can remem-

ber," Petersen says. "I won't have them on unless it's the child's own idea to do the show." Petersen has also raised good money for charity by auctioning off (for \$300-\$500 charitable donations) the six openings on each show for 5- and 6-year-olds.

So what other kids' TV shows does Miss Nancy like? "Not many," she says. "The only one that comes to mind is Mister Rogers. I like him."

Finally, an often-asked question: Since she obviously has affection for and a fine rapport with children, why hasn't she had little ones of her own? "It's never been the right situation," she says, alluding to a failed marriage.

And besides, it's not exactly like Peterson never gets to be around little friends.

Local columnist Bill Mann appears Tuesdays through Fridays in the Lifestyle section and Sundays in the Calendar entertainment section.

Puppet show warns children of strangers

JAN 26 1984

By Jan Silverman
The Tribune

■ Strangers might hurt you. Don't go with them, even if they call you by name, offer you a special gift or say your mother sent them.

■ Never talk to a stranger or let him get close enough to touch you. Never get in a car with a strange man or woman.

■ Policemen are your friends. Tell them about scary strangers.

■ If someone bothers you, get to a phone and dial 911. You don't need a dime.

■ Walk on the side of the street facing traffic so a car can't sneak up behind you.

These are a few of the tips to be offered to children who watch a television puppet show called "No Thank You, Stranger" Friday at 8:30 a.m. on Romper Room, KTVU-Channel 2.

The need for such educational programs has been made obvious by the tragic cases of local children such as Tara Burke of West Pittsburg, the 2-year-old who was kidnapped and sexually abused for 10 months before being rescued, and little Angela Bugay of Antioch, re-

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It was the Camp Fire Girls that launched the first such educational program several years ago after the murder of 28 black youths in Atlanta, Ga.

The puppet show on Romper Room is part of nationwide "response programs" designed by the Camp Fire Girls to meet the needs of today's children. Both programs are available on request for child

care centers, day camps and schools.

Camp Fire's first program, called "I Can Do It," aimed at third, fourth and fifth graders, teaches self-reliance to children who are without adult supervision for part of the day. It deals directly with the dangers of rape and is already being given at schools throughout Alame-

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da and Contra Costa counties, including seven schools in Oakland.

The new program, for kindergarteners, first and second graders, is called "I'm Safe and I'm Sure." It teaches youngsters to avoid dangerous situations and stresses positive social attitudes in the hope of avoiding delinquent behavior. The puppet show "No Thank You, Stranger," is part of this program.

Pat Balmes of the Camp Fire Girls explains that the program for older children "is quite specific about what could happen to them in the hands of a stranger," including kidnap, rape and murder.

The program for younger children, developed just this year for national distribution and called "I'm Safe and I'm Sure," takes a more gentle approach.

"It's hard to talk to little children about these things," says Balmes. "You don't want to frighten them to death."

Yet, she says, the subjects must be addressed, especially for little chil-

dren who have been taught to be polite and obedient to adults.

"I'm Safe and I'm Sure" also touches on various other dangerous situations for young children, such as the family medicine cabinet.

The puppet show that airs on Romper Room, only four minutes long because of the short attention span of small children, tells the story of a girl and a boy who are lured to the car of a stranger when he offers to show them a puppy. He grabs the girl, and they are rescued in the proverbial nick of time.

Rudy Peterson, "Miss Nancy" of KTVU's Romper Room, will introduce the puppet show and chat with police officer George "Chili" Chilimidos, called "Officer Chili" by the children he has worked with at Pleasant Hill Elementary School.

KTVU's puppet show will be duplicated with local Camp Fire volunteers in the five other U.S. cities which are origination points for Romper Room, a show syndicated all over the country.

Balmes says more local volunteers are needed to put on these puppet shows at various schools and child care centers.

She points out that this

is one of the programs supported by the Camp Fire Girls' annual February candy sale.

Barbara Miller of Oakland, a Camp Fire

staffer for 16 years, is local director of the Response Programs and speaks throughout the Bay Area on child safety and crime prevention.

Our newest star: Miss Sharon of 'Romper Room'

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By Ed Levitt
The Tribune

She appears five times a week on television, but not many people know her name or recognize her face.

Even her neighbors in the East Oakland hills, she admits, haven't yet discovered that she is on TV for 30 minutes every day except weekends.

"I don't feel I'm a celebrity,"

Eastbay PEOPLE

Sharon Jeffery said.

Perhaps it's because she goes on TV at 6 in the morning, a time when millions still are sleeping or just getting up.

Or maybe it's because Sharon Jeffery, 36, just this month succeeded Ruby Petersen as hostess for 'Romper Room,' the area's only daily kids' TV show.

"Miss Sharon" is now the sixth person to head the program during its 27-year run on KTVU (Channel 2).

Outside the nightly news, it's the longest-running show in the station's history, and Jeffery enjoys history.

She teaches the subject in the Oakland Unified School District. Jeffery says she feels at home on "Romper Room," with its school-like setting.

"We call her 'Romper Room teacher.' She actually conducts a televised classroom, with six 5- and 6-year-olds taking part before the camera," says Caroline Chang, the program manager.

Jeffery beat out 100 applicants for the job. "When she au-



By Pat Greenhouse/The Tribune

Romper Room hostess Sharon Jeffery with one of her friends, 'Paddington Bear.'

ditioned," Chang said, "no children were in the studio. But she had to pretend they were there. She came across beautifully, especially her ad-libbing.

"She seemed a natural in front of the camera. We also felt with her 11 years of teaching experience, she was better qualified than the others. But the big item was her personality. She just lights up the TV screen."

Except for a brief TV appearance during the Oakland teachers strike 18 months ago, Jeffery had no television experience before joining Channel 2.

"I had never thought about a

TV career until about six years ago. Then my husband saw a newspaper ad about 'Romper Room' wanting a teacher. He suggested I apply."

But at the time, she acknowledges, "I didn't think I was ready. Then recently I saw Ruby Petersen announce on a TV talk show that she was leaving 'Romper Room' after six years.

"So I thought, Why not? I'm ready. I'll give it a try. What a pleasant surprise when I got the job."

What made it doubly pleasant for her, she says, was that she could continue teaching in the

Oakland school system.

"That's because the five daily shows are all taped on weekends at Channel 2. It's so convenient," she beamed.

Her first show appeared Monday, June 2. That morning, her husband, Willie, who also teaches school in Oakland, and her two children, ages 12 and 15, all got up early and sat alongside her to watch "Romper Room."

"She seemed very relaxed," said Willie, her husband of 17 years.

"I was a nervous wreck working before the camera," said Sharon.

"It also was the most difficult half hour I ever spent — watching myself on TV for the first time. I kept criticizing myself. But, overall, I was happy."

She believes her life hasn't changed too much.

"But the sleeping habits of my family changed dramatically. Everybody at home is staring at the TV at 6 a.m. watching 'Romper Room,'" she says.

She can't picture herself doing any other job on TV, such as reporting the nightly news.

"No," she says emphatically.

"I'm a teacher. It's in my blood. 'Romper Room' attracted me only because it gives me an opportunity to teach a lot of children — thousands more than I can do as a substitute teacher for the Oakland school district."

Both at the TV studio, where she picks the youngsters who appear on her show, and in her school classroom, "I enjoy being around children," she says.

"What attracts me is the affection I get from them. I like to feel needed. Children give me that feeling."

Born in Houston, Texas, she came to California with her family in 1968, enrolled in Sacramento City College and eventually switched to the University of California at Berkeley.

"As a child," she recalls, "I was a wonderful student — a teacher's dream. I made the honor roll. I was voted high school queen. I had a lot of fun in school. I enjoy reading, writing poetry and driving thousands of miles to see historical sites.

"Being married to a teacher," she added, "triggers a lot of book talk around our house — when I'm not preparing for my show."